

Bio of M. L. King, Jr. PREFACE

BMCS (SW) Edward F. DeAngelis of the Naval Air Forces Atlantic, Norfolk, Virginia, participated in the Topical Research Intern Program (TRIP) at the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute from August 25-September 23, 1987. Senior Chief DeAngelis worked diligently to gather materials on Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, life and work, identifying several major events and themes. Ms. Leslie Wilson, former DEOMI Research Division Chief, wrote this report based on the materials he collected. DEOMI greatly appreciates Senior Chief DeAngelis' contributions to this report.

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MARTIN LUTHER KING, JR.

INTRODUCTION

I have a dream that one day this nation
will rise up, live out the true meaning
of its creed, "We hold these truths to be
self-evident; that all men are created
equal."

Twenty years after Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., uttered these words, Public Law 98-144 was enacted, designating the third Monday in January as a Federal holiday commemorating Dr. King's birthday. George Washington is the only other American whose birthday has been a Federal holiday.

Since the first King holiday on January 20, 1986, the observance has been an occasion for people to remember Dr. King's life and dedicate themselves anew to implementing his dreams.

KING'S EARLY LIFE

Martin Luther King, Jr., was born on January 15, 1929, in Atlanta, Georgia.

At a very young age, he was fascinated by watching his father, Martin Luther King, Sr., Pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, and other ministers control audiences with skillfully chosen words. He longed to follow in their footsteps. (2:17)

He made words central to his life--weapons of defense and offense. His mother said that she could not recall a time when he was not intrigued by the sound and power of words. He once told her, "I'm going to get me some big words like that." (4:7)

EDUCATION

In September 1944, when he was only 15 years old, King entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia. At first, he was undecided as to his course of study. However, his experiences at Morehouse shaped his direction for life.

According to Stephen B. Oates, in his book *Let the Trumpet Sound--The Life of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, King fell under the spell of Dr. Benjamin Mays, the college president...

Mays challenged the traditional view of Negro education as "accommodation under protest" and championed it instead as liberation through knowledge. Education, he told his students, allowed the Negro

to be intellectually free; it was an instrument of social and personal renewal. Unlike most other Negro educators, Mays was active in the NAACP and spoke out against racial oppression. He lashed the white church in particular as America's "most conservative and hypocritical institution."

King was enormously impressed. He saw in Mays what he wanted "a real minister to be"--a rational man whose sermons were both spiritually and intellectually stimulating, a moral man who was socially involved. Thanks largely to Mays, King realized that the ministry could be a respectable force for ideas, even for social protest. And so at seventeen King elected to become a Baptist minister, like his father and maternal grandfather before him. (10:19-20)

In 1947, King became an ordained minister and assistant pastor at Ebenezer Baptist Church. The following year, when he was 19 years old, he graduated from Morehouse College with a degree in sociology. (10:20-21)

He then studied for a B.A. degree in divinity at Crozer Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. This was his first experience in a northern, integrated school.

While at Crozer, King attended a lecture by Dr. Mordecai W. Johnson, who was the president of Howard University in Washington, DC. Dr. Johnson "explained how Gandhi had forged Soul Force--the power of love or truth--into a mighty vehicle for social change." He "argued that the moral power of Gandhian nonviolence could improve race relations in America, too."

(10:31)

King was mesmerized by Gandhi's concepts, and began reading profusely about his life and philosophy.

Nonviolent resistance, Gandhi taught, meant noncooperation with evil, an idea he got from Thoreau, whose essay on civil disobedience "left a deep impression on me." ...Gandhi, for his part, took Thoreau's theory and gave it practical application in the form of strikes, boycotts, and protest marches, all conducted nonviolently and all predicated on love for the oppressor and a belief in divine justice. Gandhi's goal was not to defeat the British in India, but to redeem them through love, so as to avoid a legacy of bitterness. (10:32)

In fact, in 1929, Gandhi told a group of American Blacks:

Let not the 12 million Negroes be ashamed of the fact that they are the grandchildren of slaves. There is no dishonour in being slaves. There is dishonour in being slave owners. But let us not think of honour or dishonour in connection with the past. Let us realize that the future is with those who would be truthful, pure and loving. For, as the old wise men have said, truth ever is, untruth never was. Love alone binds and truth and love accrue only to the truly humble. (2:3)

Later, in a 1935 visit to the United States, Gandhi said, "It may be through the American Negro the unadulterated message of nonviolence will be delivered to the world." (10:110)

In 1951, King graduated from Crozer as valedictorian. He also received the Peral Plafkner Award for scholarship, \$1,200, and the Lewis Crozer Fellowship to continue his studies. (7:28)

Following Crozer, King enrolled as a Ph.D. student in philosophy at Boston University. Professor L. Harold DeWolf said of "all the doctorate students I have had at Boston University--some fifty in all--I would rate Martin Luther King among the top five." (7:30)

Despite the heavy demands of his doctoral program, King found time for two other activities--enrolling as a special student at Harvard University (7:30) and courting Coretta Scott. Coretta, a graduate of Antioch College in Ohio, was studying at the New England Conservatory of Music. They were married in June 1953. (8:45,48)

On June 5, 1955, Martin Luther King, Jr., received his Ph.D. in Systematic Theology from Boston University. (7:37)
EMPLOYMENT

Several of King's professors tried to steer him toward a university teaching career. However, he told a friend this was not for him because "I like people too much. I want to work with people." (8:48) Mrs. King said he told her

I'm going to be a pastor of a church, a large Baptist church in the South...I'm not going to be on a college campus...I'm going back South. I'm going to live in the South because that's where I'm needed. (8:48)

King received offers to become a pastor from several churches, including his father's Ebenezer Baptist Church. However, he accepted the pastorate of the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church in Montgomery, Alabama, in 1954. (8:48-49)

MONTGOMERY, ALABAMA

Montgomery could not or would not be the same after December 1 [1955]... It was the day that Mrs. Rosa Parks, a Negro seamstress was arrested for refusing to obey the bus driver's order to move from the seat in which she was sitting to let a white passenger sit down. Mrs. Parks was returning home from work and after being tired from standing all day, she sat in the first available seat, which happened to be reserved for white riders. Since Mrs. Parks refused to move, she was arrested. (7:38)

Mrs. Parks was later tried in Montgomery City Court, charged with and found guilty of violating a state law mandating segregation. She was fined \$10. Her attorney appealed the conviction. (8:21) Coincident with Mrs. Parks' trial was a one-day boycott of the buses by many members of Montgomery's Black community. (8:16)

As a result of this, an organization was established, the "Montgomery Improvement Association," (MIA) to orchestrate a complete and ongoing response to Montgomery's segregation. Dr. King was chosen president, (8:22) and announced:

We have no alternative but to protest. For many years we have shown an amazing patience. We have sometimes given our white brothers the feeling that we liked the way we were being treated. But we came here tonight to be saved from that patience that makes us patient with anything less than freedom and justice. (9:no page number)

King drew heavily on Gandhi's philosophies, and espoused:

One of the great glories of American democracy is that we have the right to protest for rights...This is a nonviolent protest. We are depending on moral and spiritual forces, using the method of passive resistance. And this is resistance, he [Gandhi] would insist, it is not stagnant passivity, a "do-nothing" method. It is not passive nonresistance to evil, it is active nonviolent resistance to evil. And it is not a method for cowards. Gandhi said that if somebody uses it because he's afraid, he's not truly nonviolent. Really, nonviolence is the way of the strong.

We have to resist because freedom is never given to anybody. For the oppressor has you in domination because he plans to keep you there. He never voluntarily gives it up. And that is where the strong resistance comes. We've got to keep on keepin' on, in order to gain freedom. It is not done voluntarily. It is done through the pressure that comes about from people who are oppressed. (10:78)

The MIA was encouraged by Dr. King's words. It agreed that instead of staging just a one-day bus boycott, the boycott would last until

- (1) Courteous treatment by the bus operators was guaranteed.
- (2) Passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis--Negroes seated from the back of the bus toward the front while whites seated from the front toward the back.
- (3) That Negro bus operators be employed on predominantly Negro routes.
(7:41)

Lerone Bennett, Jr., in *What Manner of Man: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr., 1929-1968*, observed:

The one-day boycott stretched out to 382 days. The 382 days changed the spirit of Martin Luther King, Jr., and King, thus transformed, helped to change the face and the heart of the Negro, of the white man, and of America.

Viewed thus, as a sensitizing social symbol, the Montgomery bus boycott was a myth-event comparable, in a different era and on a smaller scale, to the French Revolution, of which Kant prophetically said: "Such a phenomenon in history can never be forgotten, inasmuch as it has disclosed in human nature the rudiment of and the capacity for better things which, prior to this, no student of political science had deduced from the previous course of events."

With Montgomery, an epoch came to an end. To be sure, a new epoch did not begin immediately. There was an interregnum, a period of diffuse groping and stumbling. No one knew then, not even King, which road to take, but it was clear to many that one road, the road of submission and accommodation, had been closed, perhaps forever. (2:59-60)

The boycott was reportedly costing the Montgomery City Lines, the bus company, \$3,000 a day. Even a fare increase did not adequately compensate for the lost revenues due to the boycott. The bus company was worried.

The response of the White community turned violent. There were threatening telephone calls and harassment of Blacks. Dr. King's home was bombed. He was arrested and jailed for allegedly driving 30 miles per hour in a 25-mile-per-hour zone. (8:53-54)

On November 13, 1956, the United States Supreme Court affirmed the decision of a special U.S. District Court which declared Alabama's state and local laws requiring segregation on buses unconstitutional. (2:77)

Dr. King instructed his followers:

to go back to the buses with humility and meekness. I would be truly disappointed if any of you go back to the buses bragging we, the Negroes, won a victory over the white people... (2:77)

Our experience and growth during this past year of nonviolent protest has been such that we cannot be satisfied with a court "victory" over our white brothers. We must respond to the decision with an understanding of those who have oppressed us and with an appreciation of the new adjustments that the court order poses for them...We must act in such a way as to make possible a coming together of white people and colored people on the

basis of a real harmony of interests and understanding. We seek an integration based on mutual respect...We must now move from protest to reconciliation.
(1:137)

On December 21, 1956,

Montgomery City Lines resumed full service on all of its routes. At 5:45 a.m., [Ralph] Abernathy, [E.D.] Nixon, Mrs. Parks, and [Glenn] Smiley gathered at the King home on South Jackson. Ten minutes later, when the first bus of the day pulled up at a nearby corner, Martin Luther King, Jr., was the first passenger to the door. He paid his fare and selected a seat toward the front of the bus. Glenn Smiley, the white Texan, sat down next to him. As news photographers snapped pictures, the bus pulled away from the curb. Black Montgomery, after 382 days of mass effort, had achieved its goal. (8:82)

A White taxi driver remarked about King, "Don't let anyone fool you. That young colored preacher has got more brains in his little finger than the City Commissioners and all the politicians in this town put together." (10:111)
THE SOUTHERN CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE (SCLC)

The Supreme Court decision in the Montgomery bus case was hardly the end of the battle. There was much violence in the aftermath of the legal integration of the buses.

As a result, on January 10-11, 1957, 60 Black leaders from 10 Southern states met at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta and founded the Southern Conference on Transportation and Non-violent Integration. Its original agenda concerned "segregation in transportation facilities and voter registration." (2:83)

In February 1957, the organization elected Dr. King as President and changed its name to the Southern Leadership Conference (SLC). Its goal, as stated by Bayard Rustin, was to refuse "to accept Jim Crow in specific areas...[which] challenge...the entire social, political and economic order that has kept us second class citizens." (8:85)

To demonstrate this, Dr. King proposed a "Pilgrimage To Washington" if President Eisenhower refused to publicly denounce segregation.

King spoke of how the Pilgrimage would be an appeal to the nation, and the Congress, to pass a civil rights bill that would give the Justice Department the power to file law suits against

discriminatory registration and voting
practices anywhere in the South. (8:92)

On May 17, 1957, a smaller group than anticipated convened
at the Lincoln Memorial. Dr. King spoke, and was catapulted into
the national spotlight. (8:93)

Give us the ballot and we will no longer
plead--we will write the proper laws on
the books. Give us the ballot and we
will fill the legislature with men of
goodwill...Give us the ballot and we will
transform the salient misdeeds of the
bloodthirsty mobs into the calculated
good deeds of orderly citizens. (9:no
page number)

President Eisenhower did not change his behavior following
the Pilgrimage. He still would not meet with Black leaders.
(8:94)

In August 1957, the organization changed its name to the
Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and launched a massive
voter registration effort entitled the "Crusade for Citizenship."
At the time only one and a quarter million Blacks were registered
in the South. The drive sought to register five million new
minority voters. (8:98)

The first civil rights legislation since reconstruction was
passed in 1957, establishing a Civil Rights Commission and
allowing the Justice Department to file lawsuits when voting
rights were abridged. (8:98)

LITTLE ROCK, ARKANSAS

In 1957, violence erupted during an attempt to integrate
Little Rock's Central High School under Federal court order.
Governor Orval Faubus called out the Arkansas National Guard to
keep Blacks from attending the school. President Eisenhower,
"faced with the most serious challenge to Federal authority since
the Civil War," (10:124) was

obliged to nationalize the Arkansas
National Guard and dispatch a thousand
regular army paratroopers to Little Rock.
With white parents shouting and waving
Confederate flags, U.S. soldiers
escorted Elizabeth Eckford and eight
other Negro students into the school and
through the corridors to their classes.
Thanks to southern white intransigence,
Eisenhower became the first President
since Reconstruction to send federal
troops to enforce Negro rights in Dixie,
a move that enraged the white South and
polarized the region. (10:124-125)

Following these actions, King posed the question, "What

American politician had done the most to promote integration the last five years?" According to King,

it was Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus, who had instigated the crisis at Little Rock. His irresponsible actions brought the issue to the forefront of the conscience of the nation as nothing else had, and allowed people to see the futility of attempting to close the public school. (8:119)

THE SIT-INS

On February 1, 1960, four young black men who were students at North Carolina A & T College sat down at the lunch counter in a Greensboro F. W. Woolworth's store and refused to leave when they were denied service. Only white patrons were served at the counter. Word of their act spread among fellow students, and the next day, more than two dozen occupied the lunch counter, doing schoolwork when they also were refused service. Over the following four days the numbers grew larger and larger. A few white participants joined in, while other whites heckled the protesters. The effort spread to other Greensboro lunch counters until, by the end of the week, all such facilities were closed. With those spontaneous actions, the "sit-ins" began. (8:127)

"Sit-ins" began to spread throughout the South. Dr. King invited the students to become a youth arm of SCLC, but they declined. Instead, they formed the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). (10:154-155)

FREEDOM RIDES

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had banned segregation on interstate buses and trains in 1946, and extended the bans to bus terminals as well, in 1961 segregation was still a reality in the South. As a result, in May, 1961, James Farmer of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) implemented the "Freedom Rides." Under CORE's "auspices, interracial groups boarded two buses in Washington, D.C., and set out on a circuitous journey toward New Orleans, testing terminal facilities as they went." (10:174)

Initially, King did not participate in the Freedom Rides. Since it was CORE sponsored, he felt CORE should receive the recognition. However, SCLC bought the tickets for the Freedom Riders and was prepared to assist if necessary. And necessary it was. (10:174)

In Alabama, the Freedom Rides turned into a nightmare. On Mother's Day, May 14, an

armed mob surrounded the first bus just outside of Anniston and set the vehicle afire. The passengers narrowly escaped before the bus exploded in a shower of flames, a scene that newsmen captured in photographs that were widely publicized. The second bus managed to escape the Anniston mob and raced on to Birmingham. But as the Freedom Riders stepped off the bus there, a gang of Klansmen, promised fifteen minutes of immunity by the local police, beat them mercilessly with lead pipes, baseball bats, and bicycle chains. (10:174)

In Montgomery, Alabama, mobs assaulted the Freedom Riders. Attorney General Robert Kennedy sent 400 U.S. Marshals to calm the situation. Dr. King went to Montgomery and spoke.

The ultimate responsibility for the hideous action in Alabama last week must be placed at the door step of the governor of the state. We hear the familiar cry that morals cannot be legislated. This may be true, but behavior can be regulated. The law may not be able to make a man love me, but it can keep him from lynching me. (2:124)

The Freedom Riders met in the First Baptist Church in Montgomery, where a White mob congregated outside. The Governor declared a state of martial law and called in the National Guard.

The governor then called Attorney General Kennedy to inform him of his troop dispositions. The governor said pointedly, however, that Major General Henry Graham, the guard commander, could not guarantee the safety of Martin Luther King, Jr. "Have the general call me," Robert F. Kennedy snapped back. "I want him to say it to me. I want to hear a general of the U.S. Army say he can't protect Martin Luther King, Jr." Faced with an angry, determined attorney general, the Alabama governor retreated, admitting that it was he, not the general, who did not believe King could be protected.

Not only King but also the tattered nonviolent army of which he was the symbolic leader was protected. (2:125)

The Freedom Riders moved on to Jackson, Mississippi, the following day, under heavy guard. The Interstate Commerce Commission issued a ban on segregation in transportation, buses, and related facilities. (2:127)

BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA

According to King, in 1963 Birmingham was "the 'most thoroughly segregated city in the country,' an American Johannesburg that was ruled by fear and plagued by hate."
(8:210)

SCLC's plan for Birmingham, expressed in the "Birmingham Manifesto," involved strong boycott by Blacks of White stores around the Easter shopping season. SCLC hoped that such economic deprivation would force Birmingham to adopt SCLC's goals of

desegregation of the store facilities;
adoption of fair hiring practices by
those stores; dismissal of all charges
from previous protests; equal employment
opportunities for blacks with the city
government; reopening on a desegregated
basis of Birmingham's closed municipal
recreation facilities; and establishment
of a biracial committee to pursue further
desegregation. (8:237)

SCLC met considerable resistance from both Blacks and Whites in Birmingham, which diminished the success of the plan. Many accused King of being an "outsider."

A court order placed an injunction against any type of protest activity imaginable. King defied the order and was arrested and placed in jail. (2:134, 136)

It was from his jail cell in Birmingham that Dr. King wrote a very famous letter, in which he addressed the criticism of his activities.

I am here, along with several members of my staff, because we were invited here. I am here because I have basic organizational ties here. Beyond this, I am in Birmingham because injustice is here...

We have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and non-violent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their unjust posture; but as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals.

We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed...

For years now I have heard the word

"Wait." It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "Wait" has always meant "Never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. We must come to see with the distinguished jurist of yesterday that "justice too long delayed is justice denied." We have waited for more than three hundred and forty years for our constitutional and God-given rights...

The answer is found in the fact that there are two types of laws: There are just laws and there are unjust laws. I would agree with Saint Augustine that "An unjust law is no law at all."

Now what is the difference between the two? How does one determine when a law is just or unjust? A just law is a man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law...

We can never forget that everything Hitler did in Germany was "legal" and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was "illegal." (2:140-151)

The next phase of the Birmingham stage turned to the children. High school students, along with their younger brothers and sisters, took to the streets in protest. Police arrested more than 900 children in a day, carting them in school buses to jail. "One police captain was deeply troubled by that sight. 'Evans,' he told another officer, 'ten or fifteen years from now, we will look back on all this and we will say, how stupid can you be?'" (10:233)

Police Chief Bull Connor used excessive force against the protesters. The violence that erupted prompted former Senator Wayne Morse of Oregon to say "Birmingham 'would disgrace the Union of South Africa.'" (10:239)

It took intervention from the Federal government to quell the violence, bring order back to Birmingham, and negotiate some of the points of the Birmingham Manifesto. (10:235, 241)

MARCH ON WASHINGTON

On August 28, 1963, at least 250,000 people descended on Washington in the "largest single demonstration in movement history." (10:257) It surpassed the dreams of the six Blacks

and four White men who organized it.

The world was able to watch this massive testament to civil rights, which emphasized the following nine goals:

GOALS OF RIGHTS MARCH

- (1) A comprehensive civil rights bill from the present Congress, including provisions guaranteeing access to public accommodations, adequate and integrated education, protection of the right to vote, better housing, and authority for the Attorney General to seek injunctive relief when individuals (sic) constitutional rights are violated.
- (2) Withholding of Federal funds from all programs in which discrimination exists.
- (3) Desegregation of all public schools in 1963.
- (4) A reduction in Congressional seats in states where citizens are disenfranchised.
- (5) A stronger Executive Order prohibiting discrimination in all housing programs supported by Federal Funds.
- (6) A massive Federal Program to train and place unemployed workers.
- (7) An increase in the minimum wage to \$2 an hour. The Federal minimum covering workers in interstate industries. (sic)
- (8) Extension of the Fair Labor Standards Act to include exempted fields of employment.
- (9) A Federal Fair Employment Practices Act barring discrimination in all employments. (7:136-137)

Speakers at the march came from all spheres of life, e.g., politics, organized labor, religious groups, entertainment. Of all the speakers, Dr. King captured the day.

Five score years ago...a great American, in whose symbolic shadow we stand, signed the Emancipation Proclamation. This momentous decree came as a great beacon

light of hope to millions of Negro slaves who had been seared in the flames of withering injustice...But one hundred years later, we must face the tragic fact that the Negro is still not free. One hundred years later, the life of the Negro is still sadly crippled by the manacles of segregation and the chains of discrimination. One hundred years later, the Negro lives on a lonely island of poverty in the midst of a vast ocean of material prosperity. One hundred years later, the Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself an exile in his own land. So we have come here today to dramatize an appalling condition.

In a sense we have come to our nation's Capital to cash a check. When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men would be guaranteed the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is obvious today that America has defaulted on this promissory note insofar as her citizens of color are concerned. Instead of honoring this sacred obligation, America has given the Negro people a bad check; a check which has come back marked "insufficient funds." (10:259)

Dr. King went on to tell the crowd that in spite of the difficulties and

frustrations of the moment I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream...I have a dream that one day on the red hills of Georgia the sons of former slaves and the sons of former slaveowners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

I have a dream today...This will be the day when all of God's children will be able to sing with new meaning "My country 'tis of thee, sweet land of liberty, of thee I sing. Land where my fathers died, land of the pilgrim's pride, from every mountainside let freedom ring."

When we let freedom ring, when we let it ring from every village and every hamlet, from every state and every city, we will be able to speed up the day when all of God's children, black men and white men, Jews and Gentiles, Protestants and Catholics, will be able to join hands and sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, "Free at last! Free at last! Thank God almighty, we are free at last!" (10:259-262)

Following the march, the organizers were invited to a reception at the White House, where President John F. Kennedy "was bubbling over the success of the event." (10:262)

THE CIVIL RIGHTS ACT OF 1964

President Kennedy's assassination on November 22, 1963, did not mark the end of White House support for civil rights. In fact some of Dr. King's efforts resulted in positive results on July 2, 1964, under Lyndon Johnson's administration, with the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Heralded by many as "the most far-reaching civil rights legislation since the Reconstruction era," (5:1635) the law

contained new provisions to help guarantee Negroes the right to vote; guaranteed access to public accommodations such as hotels, motels, restaurants and places of amusement; authorized the Federal Government to sue to desegregate public facilities and schools; extended the life of the Civil Rights Commission for four years and gave it new powers; provided that federal funds could be cut off where programs were administered discriminatorily; required most companies and labor unions to grant equal employment opportunity; established a new Community Relations Service to help work out civil rights problems; required the Census Bureau to gather voting statistics by race; and authorized the Justice Department to enter into a pending civil rights case. (5:1635)

President Lyndon Baines Johnson, who had lobbied hard for passage of the law, said:

Those who are equal before God shall now be equal in the polling booths, in the classrooms, in the factories, and in hotels, restaurants, movie theaters, and other places that provide service to the public....let us close the springs of racial poison...let us lay aside irrelevant differences and make our Nation whole... (10:301)

THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Perhaps the ultimate recognition of Dr. King's crusade to secure equal rights for all came on December 10, 1964, when, at age 35, he was the youngest person ever to receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Some months earlier, right after he had been nominated, Dr. King told a friend that

Time's "Man of the Year" award was nothing special, that he had two hundred plaques at home, and what's one more? But the Nobel Peace Prize was different. This was not simply a personal award, but the most significant international endorsement possible of the civil rights struggle. This was not a prize being given to one individual...but the "foremost of earthly honors" being accorded the movement he had come to symbolize. (8:354)

Accordingly, all of the prize money was distributed among several major civil rights organizations.

SELMA, ALABAMA

The Southern Christian Leadership Conference selected Selma, Alabama, as the site to demonstrate that, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 notwithstanding, equal opportunity to vote did not exist for Blacks.

Figures from the 1960 Census showed 29,515 voting-age people in Selma--14,400 Whites and 15,115 Blacks. On January 18, 1965, when SCLC's voter registration campaign began, there were only 335 Blacks among the 9,877 registered voters in Selma. Between May 1962 and August 1964, although 795 Blacks tried to register to vote, only 93 (11.7 percent) were allowed to register. During the same period, 945 (76.7 percent) of the 1,232 Whites who applied to register were registered. (6:357) Selma officials used any means, both legal and illegal, to prevent Black voter registration. (7:180,185)

Lenwood G. Davis in I Have A Dream...The Life and Times of

Martin Luther King, Jr., described some of the tactics used.

Some Negroes stood in line, approximately six hours a day, waiting to enter the courthouse to register. Only 95 persons got in during the two weeks period since only one applicant was admitted at a time. Each had to answer long series of confusing biographical questions. Next they had to provide written answers to a twenty-page test on the Constitution, federal, state and local governments. To prove literacy, each applicant had to write a passage from the Constitution read to him by the registrar. The registrar was the sole judge of whether the applicant's writing was passable, and whether he had given the correct answers. These complicated registration procedures were so unjust that even some college professors could not "pass" the literacy test. (7:185)

It appears as though Selma officials recognized the truth in Dr. King's message of what would happen when Blacks were able to vote in Alabama. Dr. King said:

when we get the right to vote, we will send to the State House not men who will stand in the doorway of universities to keep Negroes out but men who will uphold the cause of justice. And we will send to Congress men who will sign not a manifesto for segregation but a manifesto for justice. (7:182)

The demonstrations in Selma sent Dr. King to jail once again. This time he wrote a letter to the New York Times, pointing out the ironies of his situation.

When the King of Norway participated in awarding the Nobel Peace Prize to me, he surely did not think that in less than sixty days I would be in jail. He, and almost all the world opinion will be shocked because they are little aware of the unfinished business in the South...

THIS IS SELMA, ALABAMA, (sic) THERE ARE MORE NEGROES IN JAIL WITH ME THAN THERE ARE ON THE VOTING ROLLS. (7:275)

While in jail Dr. King received word of U.S. District Judge Daniel H. Thomas' order that Alabama had to cease using its voter registration form, stop rejecting applicants because of minor errors on their forms, and process 100 applicants each day the registrars met. (8:385)

However, the situation turned more violent, and once again, the irony was driven home. ABC Network interrupted Judgment at Nuremberg, a movie about Nazi atrocities, to broadcast film of Alabama State Troopers' bloody assault on peaceful Black marchers. (8:399) "Bloody Sunday," as it came to be called, prompted President Johnson's comments.

What happened in Selma was an American tragedy. The blows that were received, the blood that was shed, the life of the good man that was lost, must strengthen the determination of each of us to bring full and equal and exact justice to all of our people...

It is wrong to do violence to peaceful citizens in the street of their town. It is wrong to deny Americans the right to vote. It is wrong to deny any person full equality because of the color of his skin. (8:407)

THE VOTING RIGHTS ACT

The actions of Selma and other southern cities to disenfranchise Blacks prompted the Johnson administration, on March 17, 1965, to submit the 1965 Voting Rights Act to Congress. It passed, and the President signed it into law on August 6.

While previous civil rights legislation provided remedy through individual legal suits, the Voting Rights Act authorized direct Federal action in Alabama, Alaska, three counties in Arizona, Georgia, one county in Idaho, Louisiana, Mississippi, 28 counties in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Virginia.

Major provisions of the law included banning the use of literacy tests; giving the Attorney General authority to supervise voter registration in areas where a literacy test was in use as of November 1, 1964, or "where fewer than 50 percent of the voting age residents were registered to vote on that date or actually voted in the 1964 Presidential election" (6:356); providing for criminal penalties for those who interfered with voting rights; and authorizing the Attorney General to prohibit the use of poll taxes as a prerequisite to voting. (6:357)

During the first five months of the law, close to 240,000 Blacks were added to the voter rolls in the South. (6:357)

MEMPHIS, TENNESSEE

In early 1968, Memphis, Tennessee's sanitation workers, most of whom were Black, organized their own chapter of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees. They requested recognition from the city, along with a contract providing for higher wages and better working conditions. The city refused, and on February 12, 1968, most of the 1,300 Black sanitation workers went on strike. (10:469)

A big march was scheduled, and then rescheduled (due to the weather) for March 28, 1968. Dr. King went to Memphis to lead the march. However, some militant groups turned the march violent, prompting Dr. King to announce over a bullhorn to the crowd, "I will never lead a violent march so, please, call it off." (10:477) Afterwards, King was very distraught that someone was killed during a march in which he was involved. He promised to return to Memphis in early April to lead a nonviolent march. (8:477,479)

Dr. King returned to Memphis on April 3, 1968. The following night, on the balcony outside of room 306 at the Lorraine Motel, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was assassinated at the age of 39 by James Earl Ray, Jr. (10:480,490) The proponent of nonviolence lost his life by violence.

EPILOGUE

In a sermon he delivered on February 4, 1968, Dr. King told the congregation at Ebenezer Baptist Church:

If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell him not to talk too long...Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize. That isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have three or four hundred other awards. That's not important. Tell them not to mention where I went to school. I'd like somebody to mention that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that day, that Martin Luther King, Jr., tried to love somebody. I want you to say that day that I tried to be right on the war question. I want you to be able to say that day, that I did try to feed the hungry. And I want you to be able to say that day that I did try in my life to clothe those who were naked. I want you to say on that day, that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison. I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity. (2:241-242)

Indeed, this is our challenge, too, as we commemorate the birth of a man who dedicated his life to gaining civil rights for all.

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